DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 531 SP 015 171

TITLE	The Families Learning Together Study.
INSTITUTION	Home and School Inst., Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	79
NOTE	19p.; For related document, see SP 015 172
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Adult Education; *Compensatory Education Programs; Curriculum Design; *Educationally Disadvantaged; *Family Involvement; Family Role; Family School Relationship; Parenthood Education; Parent Participation; *Program Content; Validated Programs

ABSTRACT

The goal of the Families Learning Together Program is to design, systematize, field test, evaluate and publish a dual-focus curriculum for teaching adults and children. Adult basic education, parenting, and daily life skills were to be taught to adults as these adults simultaneously taught their children attitudes and skills of the program are presented. A description is given of the field testing of the program and evaluation of the program. A summary is given of the overall effectiveness of the program. (JD)

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THE FAMILIES LEARNING TOGETHER STUDY

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ABSTRACT

About Families Learning Together

This program is a newly developed, cost effective and academically effective family learning curriculum that builds children's skills and adult knowledge simultaneously. The program is designed for children in grades kindergarten through sixth and for adults of any age.

Families Learning Together, tested by 364 families in two communities, has been identified as effecting positive change in children's attitudes toward school, parental involvement in education, children's concepts of themselves as learners and their sense of responsibility about doing schoolwork and about doing jobs at home.

In both rural and urban field-test sites 98% of the responses from participating families indicated both parents and children liked the program.

In rural Landrum, South Carolina 95% of the adult responses and 98% of the adult perceptions about their children's learning indicated that adults and children had learned useful skills and knowledge from using the program.

In urban Flint, Michigan 86% of the adult responses and 94% of the adult perceptions about their children's learning indicated that adults and children had learned from using the program. Details on the findings are reported on the following pages.

Families Learning Together, made possible by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, is a daily life curriculum based on the Home and School Institute "recipe" method. This method uses ordinary objects at home and in the community to teach children school success skills in ways that are short, easy, no-cost, and enjoyable. In this new curriculum these "recipes" now combine three basic ingredients:

*Children's reading and math activities

*Adult basic knowledge in such areas as nutrition and safety

*Tips to help adults be better parents

The complete program presents the curriculum, findings on the curriculum's effectiveness, an overview of the research base on which this system is based, and instructional approaches for integrating this family learning system with school basic skills' programs.

Inquiries concerning Families Learning Together kits for families and for teachers and the Study should be addressed to:

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THE HOME AND SCHOOL INSTITUTE APPROACH

BACKGROUND: Since 1965, The Home and School Institute has developed and tested "Home Learning Recipes." This is a strategy centering on building children's basic skills by involving parents as teachers at home and in the community in ways that do not duplicate the work of the school. This innovative strategy has been documented to raise student achievement and is based on the research which points to the home as the critical determiner of children's achievement.

Until the Families Learning Together program was developed, the "recipe" method had been used to build children's learning--involving adults in the teaching process--but not targeting adults as learners themselves.

The work of The Home and School Institute (HSI) has been devoted in large part to developing a parent-as-teacher strategy which can be utilized on a cost-effective basis with school age children.

The parent-as-teacher model poses the challenge of designing a low-cost, effective delivery system of service that is workable for schools and homes today. Pioneering work in federal programs at the preschool level has often involved the use of home visitors. While this approach is effective, it is costly. This cost argues against its replication on a wide-scale basis, particularly when the schools are under today's budgetary pressures.

The Home and School Institute Study
Families Learning Together

HSI has designed programs based on assuming basic family strengths. This is a "nondeficit" approach building on the strengths inherent in the family and marshalling available family resources and abilities to improve children's academic skills. This in turn increases self-esteem of family members.

The HSI "nondeficit" approach, underlying the Families Learning Together program, makes the following assumptions:

*All children have had meaningful experiences. However the disadvantaged child's experiences, in contrast to the advantaged child, have been different and fewer in number to prepare the child for success in school.

*Home environments, no matter how poor, are a citadel of care and concern for children.

*All parents intrinsically possess the abilities to help their child succeed in school.

*Family concern can be readily translated into practical support for children and for schools. Professionals need only provide the materials and support to enable parents to become both more active and skilled participants in their child's education.

*Schools should start with what the family has instead of worrying about what it doesn't have.

*Schools, no matter how understaffed or under equipped, have the capabilities of reaching out and effecting family involvement--using easy, inexpensive materials, without waiting for what probably won't come--organizational change or massive government funding.

This approach constructs a mutually reinforcing home-school system. Families are assisted to:

*Use strategies at home to supplement the school's work. The HSI family involvement model is built on the basic premise of separate but complementary roles for parent and teacher.

*Understand that accountability for a child's education can be shared among school, home and community. Families are helped in their role as key people in the student's learning process.

THE TASK: The goal of the Families Learning Together program was to design, systematize, field-test, evaluate and publish a dual-focus curriculum for teaching adults and children. Adult basic education, parenting and daily life skills were to be taught to adults simultaneously as these adults taught their children attitudes and skills needed for successful living.

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY: The following questions were used as the criteria for judging the effectiveness of this new curriculum:

Overall Effectiveness of Curriculum Design

Did simultaneous learning and satisfaction for children and adults occur as they used the materials?

Were adults and children satisfied with the format of the materials?

Parenting Education

As a result of participation in this project do parents feel they are more successful in their parenting role?

Do parents report increased knowledge about their children, i.e. how their children think and study?

Do parents perceive the time spent with their children as more rewarding and productive?

Do parents feel more confident about being teachers of their own children?

Related Adult Learning

Has the curriculum affected adult behavior and attitudes in functional competency areas such as occupational knowledge, consumer economics, health/safety, citizenship, government and law, and community resources?

Adaptability To Diverse Populations

Does this curriculum have potential for reaching families of differing socio-economic and racial backgrounds in rural and urban settings in different parts of the country?

Does it appeal to diverse family groups, i.e. working parents, single parent families, fathers?

Teacher Perceptions Of The Curriculum

Do the teachers perceive the curriculum as valuable for children?

Do teachers perceive the curriculum as useful in enhancing parental involvement?

Potential For Use

Do parents indicate a willingness to use the curriculum?

Do teachers indicate a willingness to use the curriculum?

Cost Effectiveness

Is Families Learning Together a cost effective program?

Child Change

Will positive changes in attitudes, skills and behavior of children be perceived by teachers, parents, and by children themselves?

THE FAMILIES LEARNING TOGETHER CURRICULUM: PROGRAM DESIGN AND CONTENT

HSI's primary and initial task was to design a curriculum of 48 "recipes" that could be field-tested and evaluated.

Basic working guidelines for all materials were established: The curriculum (see samples) reflects adherence to these guidelines:

All "recipes" were to be written on one page at no higher than sixth grade ("functional literacy") reading level.

All "recipes" were to focus concurrently on adult learning in daily life and job skills, parenting education and children's basic skills in math and reading.

The "recipes" were to be targeted for children in grades K-6; half (24) of the "recipes" were to be prepared for grades K-3, half (24) were to be prepared for grades 4-6.

Curriculum content objectives were identified: All "recipes" were to be designed as structured, yet flexible, interactions between child and parent. They were to be everyday life tasks and needs of parents and children such as handling family emergencies, serving more nutritious meals, and saving money.

All "recipes" were to employ the HSI learning method of activities that happen within daily life at home or in the community. The "recipe" activities were to take as little time as possible. They were to use no or low-cost, readily available materials. Most importantly they were to be anjoyable for adults and children.

The adult learning areas selected were to be keyed to the Adult Performance Level (APL) knowledge areas identified by the University of Texas at Austin and the U. S. Office of Education: Occupational Knowledge, Consumer Economics, Health/Safety, Citizenship/Government and Law and Community Resources.

The "recipes" were to provide a basic graphic format which would outline a consistent set of "recipe" parts and purposes. The parts were to be identified by symbols to be used throughout the curriculum.

All "recipes" were to encourage individual creativity of parents and children so that the "recipes" themselves function as take-off points for continuing family interaction.

THESE OBJECTIVES ARE REFLECTED IN THE CURRICULUM CONTENT:

1. To strengthen the abilities of adults as lifelong learners and problem solvers in specific daily life job related and home related skills.

2. To develop adult competency and self-confidence in the parenting role. This objective is further defined in these two areas:

   To develop an awareness of their importance to their children's success.

   To build parents' capacities as teachers at home, enhancing children's development and fostering more positive interpersonal relationships in the family.

3. To increase parental interest and involvement in education and to increase parent/teacher understanding and cooperation.

4. To foster optimum development, positive attitudes and skills of children so that they can function more successfully and happily at home, at school and in the community.

FIELD TESTING THE CURRICULUM

The Educational Products Information Clearinghouse has identified the lack of field-testing of curriculum materials as one of the most serious problems in American education. Approximately 90% of the materials developed have never been field-tested for learner feedback.

It was determined that a field-test implementation of this curriculum would test its use and effectiveness with a population. The Families Learning Together program was field-tested in two communities: in urban Flint, Michigan and in rural Landrum, South Carolina.

It is recognized that the field-testing procedures and results from the Families Learning Together program represent an initial effort to evaluate a new curriculum concept.

THE TEST SITES

Flint is a northern, industrial community (population 170,000) where 40% of the participating families reported incomes over $20,000. Landrum is a southern, rural community (population 2500) with an average annual family income of under $16,000. At both sites, families volunteered to participate in the program.

The populations served at both sites consisted of 364 families with 564 children using the materials. In Flint, there were 60 families and 91 children participating. In Landrum, there were 304 families and 473 children. The field-test component of the program operated from January to June 1979 for a total of six months of field-test time.

THE "DELIVERY" SYSTEMS

Identification of field-test families in Flint was done by the community-based Home Learning Center. A school-based delivery system for the materials was not feasible in Flint. It was determined that mail was the only available way to reach the Flint families.

This called for the mailing of curriculum materials weekly from HSI's Washington office. Feedback and evaluation forms had to be returned directly to HSI by the families.

Recognizing the severe limitation incurred by this mailing delivery model, HSI sought a second population to test the effectiveness of the curriculum materials utilizing a school-based delivery system. The O. P. Earle Elemenetary School in Landrum agreed to participate. Each week all 23 teachers in the school sent "recipes" home with the children whose families volunteered to participate. Feedback and evaluation forms were returned by the children to the teacher. After compilation, they were returned to HSI for analysis.

Thirty-two "recipes" were tested in Flint--16 at the K-3 and 4-6 levels. Twenty-four "recipes" were tested in Landrum, 12 each at the K-3 and 4-6 levels.

EVALUATION

Families Learning Together utilized the following documentation/evaluation process in the field-test to assess the effectiveness of the materials. The instruments developed and used were:

1. Pre field-test parent survey to acquaint parents with aspects of the program.
2. Weekly feedback sheets for each "recipe" to determine parent/child reaction and effectiveness of content.
3. Teacher questionnaire to survey their perceptions of program effectiveness and potential for replication.

4. Parent, teacher, child questionnaires to survey the groups' perceptions of the effectiveness of the program on the children including skill development, attitudinal and behavioral change.

5. Post field-test parent survey to help assess content for adult and child learning, presentation, and revisions/suggestions for curriculum.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

NOTE: A complete technical report providing methodology, demographics and substantiating documentation for the findings cited is available from the Home and School Institute

The Families Learning Together program experienced exceptional success with both urban and rural field-test populations of parents and children. In the school-based delivery model, it experienced similar success with teachers.

Participants reported that the curriculum was valuable to them; their attitudes and behavior were positively enhanced; and they indicated that they would repeat the experience.

Families Learning Together reached diverse family structures and families representing a spectrum of socio-economic levels. The program reached beyond the targeted participants to other families.

The cost per participant, which included the development and field-test evaluation of the curriculum, was low; and the potential for replication for other communities is genuine.

A. OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CURRICULUM

In surveying the field-test groups to determine their perceptions of the effectiveness of the program, it was found that an overwhelming majority in each group--parents, children, teachers--either agreed or strongly agreed that the following five areas in family life had been improved.

1. Children's attitudes toward school
2. Parental interest and involvement in their children's education
3. Self-concept of children as learners
4. Children's sense of responsibility about doing schoolwork
5. Children's sense of responsibility about doing jobs at home

In both rural and urban field-test sites, 98% of the responses on the feedback sheets from participating families indicated that they liked the program.

In rural Landrum, South Carolina, 95% of the adult responses and 98% of the adult perceptions about their children's learning indicated that they had learned useful skills and knowledge from using the program.

In urban Flint, Michigan, 86% of the adult responses and 94% of the adult perceptions about their children's learning indicated that they had learned from using the program.

Written comments were received from parents about individual "recipes." Of 368 comments from the rural site, 95% were positive and/or contained suggestions, adaptations, or noted circumstances over which the participants had no control, e.g., frequency of distribution coupled with time allotment. Within the 5% negative responses, the comments were scattered in the categories of inappropriate level/activity, child already knowing the skill, or parent/child disliked the activity.

Of 197 comments from the urban site, 85% were positive and/or contained suggestions, adaptations or noted circumstances over which the participants had no control, e.g., no TV in their home or seasonal conditions which precluded doing the activity.

Within the 15% negative responses, comments were scattered in the categories of inappropriate level/activity, child already knowing the skill, or parent/child disliked the activity. However, it should be noted that of the 29 negative responses, 17 were made by one participant and/or were directed at two grade K-3 "recipes." Thus if these special circumstances are extracted from the negative responses, the percentage of positive responses is raised to 94%.

Both urban and rural populations reflected approximately similar percentages of positive comments about the "recipes." The "recipes" which the children liked the most were also those liked most by their parents. (Examples of parent comments and suggestions from both sites are included in the sample packet.)

Another indicator of curriculum effectiveness is voluntary participation. In the school-based model, 96% of the population which originally indicated that they would participate actually did. Of the total number of families within the school population, 77% participated in the program.

In the urban site, of the potential pool of participants initially identified for the program, 51% of the children actually participated. The urban families participated despite the fact that the delivery method was not through the local school but through the mail and despite the fact that these parents did not have the same school in common and did not live in the same community.

Another indicator of curriculum effectiveness is its applicability and appeal to both boys and girls. The number of boys and girls in both populations was approximately equally divided. It was found in Landrum, where the size of the field-test population was large enough to suggest trends, that 71% of the boys in the program, across the grades from K through six, completed three or more of the "recipes." This compares to 79% of the girls in the program who completed three or more "recipes." This finding suggests that Families Learning Together shows evidence of appealing to and retaining boys as well as girls and thus provides an alternative method to traditional homework for reinforcing academics for boys.

B. THE "RECIPE" FORMAT

All of the families in both field-test sites felt that the "Recipes" were not difficult, and they liked the presentation of the activity on the page.

Of the reporting population, 91% indicated that they had little difficulty finding the time needed to do the "recipes"; 97% of the parents in all of the grades, K-6, found the Did You Know, Help and More Ideas sections of each "recipe" helpful and useful.

C. PARENTING EDUCATION

Of the urban parents responding, 95% felt that the "recipes" showed them ways of helping their child to learn in the home.

Of the rural parents reporting, 98.5% indicated that they feel more confident as teachers of their own child as a result of doing the "recipes."

Parents reported the following changes in their own behavior as a result of participating in the Families Learning Together program:

a. 99% reported that they take more time to praise their child's accomplishments.

b. 75% reported taking more time to discuss family buying decisions.

c. 81% reported they now checked to make sure family immunizations are up-to-date.

d. 63% reported they now shared household chores as a team.

D. RELATED ADULT LEARNING

Adults reported the following changes in their behavior as a result of participating in the program: These include behaviors related to Adult Performance Level (APL) competencies.

a. 74% reported that they are now learning and using emergency telephone numbers.

b. 89% reported that they are now doing some physical conditioning exercises on regular basis.

c. 89% reported they now checked food products for additives.

d. 52% reported they now set up personal health files for each member of their family.

e. 60% reported they now checked the services and interest rates of banks more carefully.

f. 84% reported keeping closer track now of household expenses.

E. ADAPTABILITY TO DIVERSE POPULATIONS

Single Parents	Urban and Rural Sites
Working Mothers	Different Sections of the Country
Involvement of Fathers	White and Black Families

Families Learning Together was tested in two sites: a southern rural community and a northern, urban community. In both sites, the curriculum received overwhelming acceptance with 98% of the total parent population indicating that they consistently enjoyed using the program.

The demographics of the two populations reveal a significant number of single parents and of mothers working outside the home. It can be inferred from the level of acceptance and from the level of continuing participation in the program by the total population that the program can be successfully used with single parents and with working mothers.

It can also be inferred from the high level of acceptance and participation that the program was successful in reaching both white and black families, regardless of socio-economic backgrounds. In Landrum, with average family income below $16,000 annually, 10% of the participating children were black. In Flint, with 40% of the participating families reporting over $20,000 annual income, 30% of the participating children were black.

On site in Landrum, children in ten classes, grades two through six, were asked if their fathers had helped them with the "recipes." One third of the participating children indicated that their fathers had helped them. Thus, Families Learning Together can be seen as a useful strategy to reach other family members besides mothers.

F. TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRICULUM

Of the rural site teachers reporting, 80% indicated that they believe that families want to help children succeed in school but that families need help. (Note: No schools were involved in the urban test site.) These teachers felt that the Families Learning Together curriculum helped families become more aware of their roles as parents.

Among the teacher comments about their perceptions of the changes in students and their parents as a result of the program are these:

"Parents and children seem to enjoy each other more."

"Parents are spending more time listening to children and helping them."

"Students are showing more enthusiasm and bring in homework more often."

"They seem to like school better and show an improved self-image through feelings of accomplishments."

G. POTENTIAL FOR USE

The high voluntary rate of family participation in this program, as evidenced by the return of the feedback sheets on each "recipe," indicates a high degree of consistent use in the school-based model in all grades from K-6. The total number of "recipes" completed at both test sites was 2,952.

At the rural site, 388 children and their families did three or more "recipes"; 210 children and families did all seven of the "recipes" received before the school Awards Night at the end of May 1979. In spite of the fact that the awards had already been given for participation in the program, 233 children and families continued on their own to complete the final "recipe" in the field-test series. The parents in Landrum have requested that they continue to receive "recipes" in school year 1979-80.

Of the families at the rural site in all grades from K-6, 97% said "yes" when asked if they would recommend activities like these to other families. When asked if they would continue activities like these on their own, 94% of the families with children in grades K-3 said "yes"; 89% of families with children in grades 4-6 said "yes."

The participation rate in the program at both sites indicated commitment on the part of the families. In the school-based model, only 17 families of the original group expressing interest in the program dropped out. In the mail-delivery strategy, 60% of the families continued throughout Unit I and 70% of the families continued through Unit II.

Teachers, responding to the post survey on the use of the curriculum, indicated without exception--100%--that they would participate in this program again. All teachers said that the program took only some or little time. They also recommended that the "recipes" be used as summer enrichment and reinforcement activities.

H. COST EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAM

Families Learning Together proved that it was successful in gaining the involvement of the families who were identified for possible participation in the project. Of the total number of potential families who might have participated in the program, 73% actually did. Cost effectiveness is related to the impact that a program can have, in other words, its popularity with those it is trying to reach. Families Learning Together was a popular program.

Specific cost effectiveness figures for Families Learning Together are as follows:

a. Cost per family, parent and child, was $83. This includes the development and evaluation of the curriculum materials.

b. On the basis of 2,952 "recipes" field-tested, the per "recipe" cost in the field-testing process was $26.

c. It is estimated that replication costs for the entire program of 48 "recipes" including supporting materials, could be made available for $48 per participating teacher and $24 per student and family.

The potential for impacting upon additional families beyond those targeted and beyond the limited months of the field-test operation is high. For example, the number of children ages 0-5 in families from both field-test sites who participated in this project was 213. It can be assumed that a high percentage of the younger children at home was exposed to the Families Learning Together curriculum. Approximately 6% of the parents in the rural site reported that they did the "recipe" with children other than their own. Assuming that each parent did the "recipe" with only one other child, an additional 18 families were reached.

Within these homes, observing the use of the curriculum with younger children were 323 young adults, ages 13-19. It can be inferred, from such a positive response by participating parents, that this model will be considered by a portion of these young adults for use when they have their own children.

Finally, teachers reported that they wanted to use this program again. Assuming 20 children voluntarily participating in each class and using the teacher survey responses in Landrum, the number of children who could potentially be reached in the next year alone in the single community of Landrum is 340. Thus, the Families Learning Together program indicates potential for wide ranging multiplier effects.

I. CHILD CHANGE

As reported in this summary, parents, teachers and children themselves perceived changes in children in five different areas. (Refer to page 9)

Specific child behavior changes, resulting from the use of the "recipes" have been identified by parents.

At the K-3 grade level, parents noted the following growth in their child's abilities as a result of doing these "recipes":

a. 90% of the parents reported that their child could read and understand large numbers better.

b. 89% reported their child could now organize and was more responsibile for his/her school materials.

c. 88% reported their child could now organize by alphabetical categories.

d. 90% reported that their child could now make emergency telephone calls if the need arises.

e. 85% reported that their child could now follow daily routines without being nagged.

f. 83% reported that their child could now pick out suitable clothes for the occasion and weather.

At the 4-6 grade level, parents noted the following growth in their child's abilities as a result of doing these "recipes":

a. 93% reported that their child now understood the many different jobs of men and women.

b. 89% reported that their child now understood about non-food ingredients that are added to food.

c. 87% reported that their child could now compute percentages.

d. 98% reported that their child was now aware of changing prices for goods and services.

e. 94% reported that their child now understood the need for immunizations and physical examinations.

f. 94% reported their child now understood how money earns interest in a bank.

An ultimate determiner of the effectiveness of a program involving families is whether that program has affected children's behavior and abilities.

Families Learning Together, in its initial field-test experiences, appears to have met this goal by effecting positive changes for children and for their families.

THE FINDINGS IN CONTEXT

The one-year time period in which the total program had to be written and field-tested precluded the use of standardized instruments to assess the growth in basic skills' achievement of the children as a result of the Families Learning Together "treatment." Nor was there opportunity during the brief field-test period to chart the gain in children's test scores.

It is recognized that certain limitations exist because of the need to use survey instruments that sought data directly from the subjects. However, survey instruments do provide clues to the respondents' interests and potential for development. They also identify common strengths and needs and can serve as a basis for future planning.

BUILDING UPON THESE FINDINGS: Recommendations emerging from the experience of this project.

This program needs to be made available to the public through a variety of institutions. Families Learning Together is a program that should be used not only by schools but also by such institutions as social service agencies, hospitals, voluntary service groups, parenting programs and community colleges.

This program needs replication under a variety of field-test conditions, such as differing populations, differing times, etc., with documentation as to the differing effects on children, parents and teachers.

Future uses of this program should provide for pre and post program achievement testing of participants. There is every reason to believe, based on previous documented research on the effect of HSI "recipes" for children's learning and on the research relating to the parent as teacher, that this family strategy has potential for effecting significant change in children's and adults' achievement. Not only should such tests be employed within the current year in which Families Learning Together is used: but in succeeding years, testing should be done to check for maintenance of effects resulting from this program's use.

This program needs to be used on a wide scale by national, state and local government programs which have mandated substantive parental involvement: these include Title I programs and Right to Read (Basic Skills Improvement). Families Learning Together appears, on the basis of this initial experience, to have the potency to reach and teach parents, who then reach and teach their children. Families Learning Together appears to be a strategy that can effect positive educational change.